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AMERICAN SURVEY

CIA

It's independent

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The shooting of President Reagan has revived a number of familiar policy arguments, among them the role of domestic intelligence. Predictable questions are being raised. Are there threats to the president's safety, and to public order generally, that are going undetected? Are there things that government agencies should have known about Mr John Hinckley, the alleged assailant, and others—such as Mr Edward Richardson, apparently a second would-be assassin—like him? Is greater vigilance in order?

Even though there seems to be agreement that the president was the object of no discernible conspiracy, many people in and out of government have expressed a vague sense of unprotectedness. That leads not merely to calls for a more efficient secret service with more names in its computer, but also to a nostalgia for the days when certain other agencies—in particular the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation—were watching the home front more carefully.

Nobody has yet publicly urged the FBI

Casey's men embarrassed him

to resume the controversial "cointelpros" (counter-intelligence programmes) of the 1960s and early 1970s, which featured wiretapping, break-ins and various attempts to poke through the rubbish, damage the financial circumstances and break up the marriages of dissidents. But the bureau itself, under the direction of Mr William Webster, a former federal judge, is unlikely to be enthusiastic in any event, in as much as it is still dealing with the legal trouble from the last time around. Testifying on Capitol Hill this week Mr Stewart Knight, the director of the secret service, complained that unduly burdensome restrictions on the FBI were preventing the bureau from learning, and passing along to the secret service, certain useful bits of intelligence. But at the same hearing, Mr Webster said that his agency wanted to be careful not to send the secret service a lot of "garbage".

The CIA may be another matter. Among Mr Reagan's most popular campaign themes was the promise to unshackle the intelligence community. Even as winter was turning to spring in Washington, there surfaced a transition memorandum calling for a new domestic intelligence effort involving the CIA. It reminded many of the ill-fated "Huston plan", a broad internal security programme launched under President Nixon but cancelled after a few days because of a tantrum by the late J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI. Some government official who thought the old days had not been so good leaked the memo to the press, and Mr Bobby Inman, former head of the super-secret National Security Agency and the new deputy director of the CIA, disavowed it during his senate confirmation hearings.

That is one curiosity of American intelligence: the CIA does not always behave bureaucratically in a manner consistent with its public image. The agency is distinctly cool to the prospect of reviving its domestic "Operation Chaos" of the 1960s and early 1970s. And it has caused some grief within the Reagan administration with a recent draft report from its national foreign assessments centre, questioning the evidence for the charge that the Soviet Union is financing and fomenting international terrorism. The report contradicts the assertions of Mr Richard Allen, the national security adviser and other foreign-policy spokesmen, and so it has been sent back by Mr William Casey, the director of central intelligence, to the intelligence analysts for "review". That is bound to revive the arguments over whether intelligence should be subservient to, or independent of, official American foreign policy.

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